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Foreign Policy

White House clarifies Obama's statement that Egypt is not an 'ally'

By Josh Rogin

President **Barack Obama** didn't intend to signal any change in the U.S.-Egypt relationship last night when he said Egypt is not an "ally," the White House told *The Cable* today.

In an interview with Telemundo Wednesday night, Obama said that the U.S. relationship with the new Egyptian government was a "work in progress," and emphasized that the United States is counting on the government of Egypt to better protect the U.S. Embassy in Cairo, which was attacked by protesters on Sept. 11.

"I don't think that we would consider them an ally, but we don't consider them an enemy," Obama [said](#). "They're a new government that is trying to find its way. They were democratically elected. I think that we are going to have to see how they respond to this incident."

That comment had Egypt watchers scratching their heads, especially since technically, Egypt was designated as a Major Non-NATO Ally in 1989 when Congress first passed the law creating that status, which gives them special privileges in cooperating with the United States, especially in the security and technology arenas.

White House spokesman **Tommy Vietor** told *The Cable* Thursday that the administration is not signaling a change in that status.

"I think folks are reading way too much into this," Vietor said. "'Ally' is a legal term of art. We don't have a mutual defense treaty with Egypt like we do with our NATO allies. But as the president has said, Egypt is longstanding and close partner of the United States, and we have built on that foundation by supporting Egypt's transition to democracy and working with the new government."

Vietor referred to Obama's Wednesday phone call with **Mohamed Morsy**, during which Obama pressed the Egyptian president to ensure the safety and protection of U.S. personnel and facilities in Egypt. Morsy agreed to do so, according to a White House statement on the phone call.

"The President said that he rejects efforts to denigrate Islam, but underscored that there is never any justification for violence against innocents and acts that endanger American personnel and facilities," the statement said. "President Morsi expressed his condolences for the tragic loss of American life in Libya and emphasized that Egypt would honor its obligation to ensure the safety of American personnel."

Administration sources told *The Cable* that Obama's "ally" comment was not pre-arranged or prepared by staff and that the question was not anticipated. Nevertheless, Middle East experts said Obama's word choice and tone is likely a reflection of the administration's feeling that Morsy's reaction to the attacks has not been forceful enough.

"I think it's a message from Obama that taking a less than assertive position on this is going to cost the [Egyptian] leadership at least rhetorically in the short term," said **Andrew Tabler**, senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "We heard that the Muslim Brotherhood was going to be a cooperative partner and their actions and statements yesterday were not a good example of that."

Pre-planned or not, the comments carry weight, Tabler said. He also noted that Obama was surely crafting his message not only for the Egyptians, but also for his American audience as well. The White House has come under fire for a press release from the Cairo embassy issued before the protest started that Republican challenger **Mitt Romney** slammed as an "apology for our values."

As *The Cable* [reported Wednesday](#), State Department officials in Washington objected to that statement before it was issued -- and the White House later disavowed it -- but it has nevertheless become an issue in the presidential campaign.

"It's important to remember, Obama's comment happened in both a security and political context," Tabler said.

UPDATE: At Thursday's State Department press briefing, Spokeswoman **Victoria Nuland** confirmed that Egypt remains a Major Non-NATO Ally. Asked if the president misspoke, she said, "I am not going to parse the president's words."